

THE TASK FOR SOCIALISTS: BUILDING THE REVOLUTIONARY PARTY

Joel Geier



Published by Sun Press

INTRODUCTION

This pamphlet is the text of a presentation to a Workers' Power Educational Conference on the rank and file labor revolt, held in Cleveland on June 8-9, 1974. The speaker was Joel Geier, national chairman of the International Socialists.

During the two-day conference, a series of speakers and workshops discussed a variety of issues and struggles. These included the fight for class struggle unionism, the no-strike agreement and the recent sell-out contract in steel, the newly formed Coalition of Labor Union Women, the farmworkers' movement, rank and file publications, women's liberation, shop floor organizing and the Teamsters union.

The purpose of the talk reprinted here was to bring together some of the ideas discussed during the conference and to draw some conclusions about political directions for the rank and file movement. The talk presents the views held by the International Socialists, that the developing struggles in the unions and the shops are part of a growing instability in the capitalist world, and that these struggles can be linked together through the process of building a working class party committed to socialist revolution.

The questions of working class organizing, fighting for workers' control on the shop floor and in the unions, and of building a revolutionary party in this country, are both topics of intense discussion and controversy among radicals today. We believe that the ideas presented here help to show the relationship between these activities - rank and file organizing and party building. As such, we believe that they make an important contribution to the development of theory and practice taking place on the left today.

AN INTERNATIONAL SOCIALIST PAMPHLET

Labor donated
25c

Copyright © by Sun Press, July 1974
14131 Woodward Avenue
Room 225
Highland Park, Mich. 48203

The Task For Socialists: Building The Revolutionary Party

During the last two days we have been discussing the rank and file movement: some of its problems, its relationship to especially oppressed peoples and sectors of the working class, some strategic ideas about its development, its past and its present.

Today, I would like to discuss what we hope is its future and its direction.

Our hope is that the struggles of the rank and file will lead to the creation of a revolutionary workers' party in this country, so that workers are not just able to fight more effectively within capitalism, but also able to destroy it. Not just able to sell their labor power at better terms, but able to control their labor, to carry through a revolution, to create a new and higher form of society.

By this we mean a socialist society in which the working class rules, democratically and collectively, owning and controlling the economy and the state through new forms of direct democracy, of workers' councils, workers' parties, factory committees, unions, independent black and women's organizations.

This means that working men and women will be controlling the state and the life around them, reshaping society to fit their needs and the interests of the vast masses of people - instead of the small minority whom this society revolves around today. The small minority who make enormous profits and whose privileges are protected in the only way that they can, through a police state apparatus, through imperialism, war and other crimes.

WORLD IN CRISIS

Many speakers have referred to the world economic crisis, to the conditions that are producing a rank and file movement. These conditions are producing the return of sharper forms of struggle: of economic and political struggle between nations, in the struggle for the world market; and internally in all of them, between classes, as various capitalists try to hold down costs by holding down wages and working conditions to be better able to compete on the world market.

Briefly, I would like to sketch some of this out, so that we can have a context for discussing the problems of building a revolutionary workers movement.

First let's look at the situation internationally, step out of our day-to-day perceptions and get a somewhat broader view of what the essential dynamics of the world economic crisis are. By doing this we are better able to understand what's likely to happen here, not necessarily at the

same pace or in identical ways but nonetheless over the long haul with similar developments here as elsewhere.

The last 30 years since the end of World War II have been peculiar for capitalism. There has been long sustained economic expansion and growth without sharp slumps, without the normal capitalist cycle of booms and busts, which before World War II had produced both unrest and struggle and the development of a workers' movement.

In the post war period, that capitalist cycle of booms and busts was flattened out. There was a rather constant expansion, an expansion which allowed for a rise in the living standards on the part of workers without sharp working class struggles. For capitalism it was easier to offer reforms for labor peace, uninterrupted production and the cooperation of the union bureaucracy.

All of this was projected to us as something that would continue forever and ever, that capitalism had solved its problems, that depressions were a thing of the past. Depression became a dirty word, a sort of deleted expletive in academic and government circles.

Expansion, we were taught, could go on forever, due to the wonders of Keynesian economics, of government regulations, of pump priming. Capitalism no longer had economic problems, we were taught in universities. And even the "new left" originally bought that, saying there are no more economic problems, just problems of the quality of life.

The post war boom, however, was not based upon Keynesian controls, but upon two interrelated factors which emerge from modern imperialism and which now are reaching their limits and producing their own contradictions. They were the total American domination over the world market, and the permanent war economy here at home as the prop of the American market.

The sharp struggles for the world market between capitalist countries which gave rise to modern imperialism, to two world wars in this century, to the breakdown of the capitalist equilibrium in the 20's and 30's, was overcome for a period when all of America's capitalist rivals were destroyed in the Second World War. All of them became dependent client states of the United States, which picked up and displaced their empires.

For a long period of time we had a healthy capitalism in the United States, precisely because it was the only healthy capitalism in the world. It had no serious competition from the other capitalist countries.

It was the age of Acheson and Dulles, when German, Japanese, French, Italian and British policies were all subordinated to American needs. Economically, politically and militarily the policies of those countries were all made in Washington.

And here at home we had the partial state planning of a permanent war budget. Ten percent of the GNP in the 1950's and 1960's went into the war budget. It was equal to all of the capital investment in this country. It flattened out the traditional capitalist cycle, because capital which would have fueled booms was drained off into the waste production of war goods. On the other hand the state military market absorbed these goods and limited the development of recession.

Arms spending, however, was not strictly an economic mechanism. It was not shared evenly, but paid for mainly by the United States, and to a

lesser extent Britain and France. And this arms spending, these costs, were inherently inflationary.

This meant that while the benefits of a constantly expanding market were shared by the German capitalists, the Japanese, the Italians and others, they had their war budget paid for them by the United States. They grew faster - and by the mid 60's they were increasingly capable of competing with the United States on the world market, no longer in such things as transistor radios, but now in heavy goods, in steel, autos, chemicals, and other things.

As a result we began to get economic crisis and instability returning to the capitalist system in the mid 60's. The United States was forced to cut back on arms spending as a percentage of the GNP, from 10% in the 50's and 60's to where it is now down to less than 6%. As an economic stabilizer of the system it has declined.

We have also seen the return of a sharp struggle for the world market and with it the return of the traditional business cycle of booms and busts.

RETURN OF STRUGGLE

The first post war bust that we got was in 1968 to 1970, when we got the first international recession since the start of World War II. That recession was peculiar in two respects: first, it was international; and second, inflation didn't decline during the recession, it got worse.

During that recession we got a new invention in economics, a "stagflation recession." We had a recession in which there was both stagnation and inflation.

With it we also got politically the first wave of working class struggle in the advanced industrial countries since the 1940's. It broke out sharply in 1968 in France and in Czechoslovakia, and then spread in 1969 to Italy in the "hot autumn" and in 1970 to the workers' uprising in Poland and in a less dramatic form to other European countries.

There was the start of a strike movement in Spain for the first time since Franco's fascist regime took power, and the rather uninterrupted rise in trade union militancy in Britain.

That first international recession, which led to the first wave of working class struggle in the advanced world in the post war period, did a number of things. The first thing that it did was to restore revolutionary ideas in the working class in the advanced industrial world.

Secondly it created a layer of workers, in the European countries in particular, who were to the left of the Social Democratic and Communist Parties. These workers today number in the hundreds of thousands in France, in Italy, in Britain and in some other places.

Thirdly what this upsurge did was it began to transform a number of sects - revolutionary sects who believed in proletarian revolution, but during the years of reaction in the 50's and 60's were reduced to being sects on the margins of working class life. In Britain, France and Italy in 1967, these sects consisted of 200-300 people, primarily students.

The rise of working class struggle took those groups and put them into the heart of the working class and turned them into the embryos of revolutionary parties. It did this because, for the first time in a

generation, it allowed revolutionaries to lead reform struggles and to relate them to revolutionary perspectives.

The Social Democratic and trade union leaders in Europe were more reluctant to lead struggles as a result of this return of crisis and instability to the capitalist system.

In a period of prosperity they could deliver the goods without leading sharp working class struggles. In a period of crisis they moved away from leading those struggles.

This happened for two reasons. First is their commitment to their own national capitals. That is, the commitment of the Labor Party in Britain to British capitalism means that it accepts the needs and limits of British competitive position on a world market. It accepts incomes policies, holding wages down, engaging in speed-up and so on.

As a result the union leaders who are committed to capitalism and to the national capital of their own ruling class, are less willing to lead working class struggles.

Secondly, in a period of increasing instability, winning reforms means mobilizing the rank and file in sharp forms of struggle.

That means reviving democratic rights in the union, which is a threat to the position and power and privileges of the union bureaucracy.

As a result, for the first time in a generation, revolutionaries in Britain, France and elsewhere have been able to fill some of the vacuum of leadership that has been left by the trade union leaders that wished to abandon those struggles.

Revolutionaries have been able to lead struggles over wages and working conditions, and against the capitalist state attack on the trade unions, and to relate that to revolutionary perspectives. They are able to show workers that they are the best militants, precisely because they are not committed to capitalism but to the interest of the workers.

They can show that their militancy grows from their socialist perspectives and that the sell-outs of the bureaucracy flow from its commitment to capitalism and to the needs of national capital in the struggle for the world market.

That was what the first wave of post war working class struggle was able to create in the period 1968-70, in a number of European countries.

THE NEW WAVE

In 1971 to 1973 we started a new stabilization and new booms. Internationally the advanced capitalist countries from 1971 to 1973 went through the biggest boom that they had had in over 20 years, since the Korean war. At its height it was running at a 10% rate of growth for all of the advanced capitalist countries and with an enormous inflation exacerbated by shortages.

To some extent that new boom, the biggest boom the capitalists had seen in 20 years, slowed down the process of radicalization and the development of revolutionary parties in Europe - it didn't thoroughly alter it, but slowed it down.

Towards the end of 1973 we started the second postwar international recession, which is going to be worse than the first recession, which is 1970. And the inflation that is going to come in this recession will be worse than that of the previous recession, and worse than that of the

boom of 1971 to 1973.

Already they are dropping the word "stagflation" and they have invented a new one: "slumpflation," that is, more inflation and worse recession. With a sharper economic conjuncture than the first post war recession we are going to get sharper forms of working class struggles, in the next two to three years.

Already the signs have broken out. The struggles of black workers in South Africa to gain the right to strike and to form unions, struggles in Ethiopia which are bringing down the feudal regime of Haile Selassie, the food rioting and the railroad strikes that have led to uninterrupted crisis in India, the British miners' strike, the pre-revolutionary situation that has been created in Portugal are all indexes of this new crisis.

This crisis will lead to higher and sharper forms of working class struggle than existed in 1968 to 1970. And those embryos of parties, which did not exist in 1968 to 1970 but which came out of that wave, are going to create the first small mass revolutionary parties in Europe, since the revolutionary communist parties of the 1920's were destroyed by Stalinism.

In the next two to three years we can expect to see small mass revolutionary workers' parties in France, in Britain, in Italy and possibly elsewhere as well.

THE AMERICAN SCENE

That same process is occurring here in the United States, at a much slower tempo of development. Why?

First of all, economically this is still the strongest, the fattest, the richest capitalist country in the world, and it is possible to cut into layers of fat on the system before people really start to feel the crunch, the crisis and so on.

Secondly, there are the political traditions of the United States: that is, the American working class and the American left are more politically backward than the working class and the left in Europe.

It takes a much longer period of time for consciousness in this country catch up with objective conditions. It took, for example, until 1932 or 1933 for workers to start to fight back against the depression which started in 1929.

In this country revolutionary ideas were developed or reborn in the 1960's, primarily out of the black liberation movement, but also secondarily out of the student antiwar struggles and the women's liberation movement.

In this country however, the left went down to a rather disastrous defeat in 1970. In particular the black left went down to a disastrous defeat, the black left which represents in many cases the most advanced political section of the working class.

It went down to defeat, generally, overall, due to a lack of organization, lack of strategy and most particularly due to its lack of roots inside the American working class.

The result is that when the capitalist offensive in this country started in 1971, when the New Economic Policy was introduced, already the defeat had taken place, the cadres to fight back had been pretty much wiped out and the working class has taken it on the chin in this country

for the last couple of years.

Nonetheless the same process is at work here as internationally. Indeed the economic crisis this time starts in the United States, unlike the preceding economic crisis. The crisis that the international capitalist system is facing starts here in the United States.

It is no longer the case that capitalism internationally is healthy because it has the lynchpin of a healthy American capitalism with an expanding market, dominating the world economy and with a strong permanent war economy. The economic crisis begins here in the United States and the effects of the recession are already beginning to be felt.

In the first three months of this year industrial production declined by 6.3%. Inflation which was awful last year, running at approximately 10%, did not decline during the recession, but accelerated and is running anywhere between rates of 12 and 15%.

All of this comes on top of Watergate, when the moral authority of the government and political institutions have been shaken. This country is thoroughly overripe for an industrial rank and file revolt.

This country has had in the last year a decline in real wages of 5 to 6%. It is the only country in the world that had a decline in real wages in the boom - you can imagine what will come in the bust.

Wages in this country went up 6 or 7% last year and inflation was over 10%. In Italy, for example, where inflation was 12%, wages went up 29% so real wages went up around 15 or 16%. In Japan they went up 26%, in France, Britain and Germany they went up around 14 or 15%.

The result is that in this country, in the last year, the decline in real wages is such that real wages are now back to where they were in 1965, all of the gains of 10 years have been wiped out.

In 1965 a manufacturing worker with three dependents was paid \$107.00 a week, in 1974 he was paid \$170.00 a week, that is an increase of \$63.00 in close to 10 years. Take home pay after inflation and taxes are deducted in 1965 was \$102.41. In 1974 it is \$102.24. Wages went up \$63.00, in reality they declined \$.17. That is what the American working class has had to show for the last 10 years.

The result is that, as I mentioned, this country is overripe for a rank and file revolt - for a rank and file movement inside the unions, because in this country the form that a working class revolt will take will be that of a rank and file movement inside the unions.

Although the unions are bureaucratized, although they are atrophied as organs of struggle, they are the only working class organizations that exist in this country. And the working class revolt that takes place will find its form as a revolt inside the unions.

BUILDING A PARTY

For the International Socialists, our strategy towards building a revolutionary party in this country is to be part of building the rank and file movement and building a revolutionary party out of that rank and file movement.

The conditions are similar to Europe. The union leaders refuse to put up an adequate fight, essentially for the same reason as the European Social Democratic and Communist leaders will not. U.S. union leaders are tied to American capitalism and to its competitive position on the

world market.

They put up less of a fight than Europeans did because there is less rank and file pressure on them so far. That's why real wages declined in the boom. In the 50's and early 60's our union leaders could "bring home the bacon," as they put it, and at times do it by trading off working conditions for wages. The working conditions that were won, the strong shop floor organization that was won by the CIO upsurge in the 30's was traded off in the late 40's and 50's for higher wages.

There was no need to mobilize the rank and file, they could deliver the bacon through that sort of trade off. Today, however, the capitalist offensive is a total attack on all fronts: on wages, in which wage controls were introduced and real wages held down, on working conditions, in which there's a speed-up that took the form of GMAD in auto.

There the UAW leadership allowed the Lordstown and Norwood workers to do down in defeat in isolated strikes, precisely because they wanted to see speed-up introduced so that American capitalism will be competitive against its European and Japanese rivals.

Or take the productivity committees that exist in steel precisely for the same reason: because the steel leadership, the Abels, are committed to the idea that American steel should be produced cheaper than Japanese or German steel.

The attack also takes the form of economic nationalism: the introduction of tariffs, of protectionism. It is an attack on social conditions as well, on the schools and welfare, on the right to strike and an attempt to introduce compulsory arbitration.

And you get the compliance of the trade union leadership for that, you get as Ed Mann [a rank and file steel workers' leader] showed yesterday, Abel giving up the right to strike until 1980 in a period of inflation and deteriorating conditions, of Shanker of the teachers' union saying that striking is a fascist form and what we need is democratic compulsory arbitration.

You get greater political and state intervention over wages, into strikes. All of this economic nationalism, this total attack on wages, on social conditions, and against the unions politically requires a total answer.

The union leaders who accept the limits of American capitalism have given their answer: Meany is for wage controls, Shanker is for giving up the right to strike, Woodcock is for import controls, Abel is for productivity commissions, Fitzsimmons attacks the truckers who go out on strike, not the oil monopolies.

They have given their answer, they want to defend American capitalism, the goose that lays the golden eggs as you know! This allows revolutionaries in this country to play the same role that they are assigned to play in Europe, to fill that vacuum, to start to provide leadership for rank and file working class struggle, to start to provide that total answer. Revolutionaries will be able to lead the day to day struggles of workers over working conditions and wages, against the government attack on the unions, to build a rank and file movement, to fight for a new strategy, a new program and a new leadership in the unions, against the sell out bureaucracy that is committed to the corporations.

To fight against the wage controls, and for wage increases to beat

inflation, to fight against productivity deals, for workers' control of production. To fight against the unemployment, and the racist and sexist discrimination which is going to be exacerbated in the crisis, as it will be blacks and women workers who will feel it first and will be shipped out of the plants first.

To create international solidarity with workers in other countries, instead of protectionism which is what led to two imperialist wars so far in this century, and to fight for independent labor political action against the capitalist parties and the capitalist politicians.

It is possible for revolutionaries to lead those struggles, to start to organize to lead those struggles by organizing a rank and file movement, and to draw the connections between union militancy and socialist perspectives.

The struggles for those reforms today and the mobilization of a rank and file movement, requires more militant methods of struggle. And it is up to us to show the movement that its direction must go beyond capitalism. It is in this struggle to create a rank and file movement that we can create the cadre, the first cadres of a revolutionary workers party.

Industrial militancy produces the working class leadership which is open to be convinced that the total attack produced by the long term deterioration of American capitalism requires a total answer. This leadership which is thrown up in the course of struggle, has to be organized in a revolutionary workers party which is the link between the struggles in the different factories, which acts as a vanguard for the rest of the class, which brings together workers from different mills, offices, and unions, from different sectors and struggles of the working class.

The party organizes the network of working class leaders who share their experience, who generalize their strategies for their struggle, who overcome the parochialism of individual struggles.

The party brings into the struggle the difficult questions some would like to avoid in the short term, like black liberation or women's liberation, which are crucial to long term success.

ORGANIZE FOR REVOLUTION

The job of the revolutionary party is not to substitute itself for the working class, in the fashion of the social democratic or Stalinist parties, but to organize the working class and its consciousness. The role of the party in fighting for socialism is not to form a new elite, but to raise the working class itself to the level of ruling class.

The consciousness of the working class is developed through its own struggles, the struggles that make it fit to lead society. It is in the course of struggle that workers' creativity is untapped, that horizons are broadened, that self-consciousness and self-confidence are developed.

That is what takes place in the struggles of the working class, and the same thing is true in the independent struggles of black people and women - consciousness and strength develop in struggle.

But for that consciousness to bear fruit, it must create a party which acts as a guide and a comrade in the struggle, learning from the

struggles of the working class and generalizing the experiences, giving a lead by showing the direction and goal of the struggle and putting forward tactics and strategies to advance both the struggle and the final goal.

A revolutionary party has to be based on firm principles and flexible tactics, not the sectarian thing in which every tactic is turned into a principle because you have no principles that are firm. Behind the sectarian stands an opportunist who is always willing to throw his principles out the window.

A revolutionary party must be built on firm principles that all of its members share, precisely so they can have flexible tactics, to take advantage of every opportunity that develops so they are capable of executing every tactical maneuver that becomes necessary as the class struggle develops - instead of backing up every time it takes a different turn.

A revolutionary party has to be based on freedom of criticism and discipline in action. That means full internal democracy, the right of people to think, to organize opposition to the leadership, to form factions, to be able to criticize themselves and learn from their mistakes instead of incorporating their mistakes into a methodology.

But it also means the strictest discipline in action - not a talk shop, but a collective body that joins revolutionaries from factories and shops together so that they can act together with common purpose, not as dispersed individuals.

It also requires an international party which links up the struggles of workers in France, in Germany, in Italy, and so on, so they are not pitted against each other in one war after another as they have been in this century.

BUILDING THE I.S.

The International Socialists believe that we have a vital contribution to make in developing both a rank and file movement and a revolutionary party out of it. We continue the traditions of the revolutionary Communist movements of the 1920's, we base ourselves on the theoretical conquests that they made as well as learning the lessons of the defeat of the revolutionary Marxist movement in the 30's and 40's.

We have put together the ideas of the revolutionary movements of this century - that socialism can only come from a revolution from below, and not from some substitutionist dispensation from above, from some benevolent elite whether it be social democratic or Stalinist, from Allende or Castro or Mao.

Socialism means workers control of production and the state - not just the nationalization of the means of production - it means the need of soviets, of workers' councils to destroy the old state apparatus and create a new form of state in which the masses are armed, there is no police above them, in which every official is elected and recallable, in which none makes more than a worker, so there is no basis for a privileged bureaucracy.

Socialism means that women are brought into economic, political and social life, so that they are liberated rather than being forced back into subservience and slavery in the family. It means socializing child care

and housework. It means building unity between black and white workers - unity on the basis of equality, up to and including the right of black people to self-determination if they so choose.

The road to socialist revolution requires the centrality of the industrial working class, and it requires no subordination to the foreign policies of Washington, Moscow, or Peking, which destroyed the revolutionary movements of the 30's, 40's, and 50's and is continuing to do so as it did in Indonesia or in Chile last year.

Aside from synthesizing those ideas which are necessary to carry through a successful socialist revolution here and internationally, the International Socialists are attempting to put those ideas into practice - to start the job of creating a rank and file movement and an alternative leadership inside the unions. We do this by building rank and file groups, in auto, in steel, in teamsters, in teachers, among telephone workers, among white collar workers and starting to create some of the first rank and file working class papers in conjunction with other militants.

The International Socialists today are in a position where revolutionary groups were in the 1960's in Europe.

We are still on the margins of working class life. Unfortunately we have not yet had our France or Czechoslovakia. Fortunately however, we have not yet had our Chile or the possible disaster that is developing in Portugal, where the crisis has broken out but because there is not yet any revolutionary party it may lead to a military dictatorship as in Chile.

That is where we are at. We believe that for the working class to emancipate itself it needs the ideas and the organization of a group like the International Socialists. The International Socialists has to be built to play the role of training and educating a new generation of working class leaders. The time to start is today, and the place to start is in the rank and file movement, and the group to start it with is the International Socialists.

And we would like to ask those of you who are not members to either cooperate with us or to join us in building both a rank and file workers' movement and a revolutionary party to help build a socialist society in this country.

Workers' Power

A revolutionary socialist biweekly,
published by the International So-
cialists.

Subscriptions: \$3.50 a year; *Sup-
porting subs:* \$5 a year; *Foreign
subs:* \$5 a year; *Bundles:* 10¢ a
copy for ten copies or more; *Intro-
ductory subs:* \$1 for three months.

I enclose _____ Please send
me a _____ subscription to
Workers' Power.

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

14131 Woodward Ave.
Highland Park, MI 48203

SUBSCRIBE NOW